

**OPINION // OUTLOOK**

# He did things 'the right way.' Trump's courthouse arrests may still have him deported. | Opinion

By **Regina Lankenau**, *Editorial Writer and Columnist*

June 13, 2025





Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other federal law enforcement agents detain and escort two immigrant women from the federal immigration courts in San Antonio on Tues, Jun 10, 2025.

Christopher Lee/Staff Photographer

 Listen Now: He did things 'the right way.' Trump's courthouse 1x

 6:58 

In the jungle, laws don't exist. That was the first lesson an iron-willed teenager learned while navigating the Darién Gap.

The second? The biggest danger isn't the jaguars, crocodiles or venomous vipers — it's the people. Bandits, kidnappers and smugglers make that 66-mile stretch of

unforgiving swamp between Panama and Colombia a living hell.

“Without laws,” the 19-year-old Venezuelan told me in Spanish, “there’s only chaos.”

---

**ADVERTISEMENT**

Article continues below this ad



e-Edition

Account

---

This belief — that he was going to a land of laws — carried him through half a dozen countries, and straight to an immigration court in Houston, where I met him a couple of months ago. To avoid retaliation in his immigration case, I’m only using his first name, Anderson. With close-cropped hair and serious eyes, he shared how he’d followed U.S. laws to the letter — using the Biden-era CBP One app to make an immigration appointment, patiently crossing at an official port of entry in El Paso and requesting asylum last December.

The asylum process is infamously slow, often dragging on for years in court. But when we last spoke in April right after his first hearing, Anderson was safe from deportation. An immigration judge had granted him a temporary continuance to find an attorney and fight his case.

Anderson's journey to the U.S. feels like it belongs to a now-quaint era when U.S. immigration policy, messy as it was, at least tried to offer legal pathways to migrants who played by the rules. Now, things feel darker. The rules, far murkier.

For the past few weeks, dozens of unsuspecting asylum seekers across the nation have dutifully shown up to their court appointments, only to find themselves in the handcuffs of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. In Houston on Wednesday, plainclothes ICE agents arrested a woman at the South Gessner immigration court, marking the third straight day of courthouse arrests. At least six other asylum seekers, including a Cuban national, have also been swept up in Houston.



ICE agents lead a man in handcuffs from the entrance of the Federal Building where the immigration court resides on the tenth floor in Houston, Monday, June 9, 2025.

Kirk Sides/Houston Chronicle

In a grim new strategy to boost deportation numbers, immigration courts, once protected as “sensitive locations” off-limits to ICE, have become settings for ambushes. All over the country, Department of Homeland Security attorneys seem to be systematically petitioning immigration judges to quickly dismiss removal proceedings.

---

**ADVERTISEMENT**

Article continues below this ad

Ad removed. [Details](#)

---

“That sounds like it would be a good thing, right?” Alexa Sendukas, managing attorney with the Galveston-Houston Immigrant Representation Project, said this week. In the past, a dismissal *was* good, she explained; it indicated that the case wasn’t a deportation priority, and so gave migrants time to explore legal options.

But under Trump, dismissals no longer offer safety — they’re a setup. Migrants attending hearings leave the courtroom unaware that they’ve been left without any legal protection. ICE arresting officers, waiting just outside, swoop in, ready to funnel the migrants into expedited removal — a fast-track deportation process that bypasses any sort of judicial review.

Until now, expedited removal was reserved for migrants caught near the border, usually right after entry. But Trump’s expanded policy applies nationwide, targeting

anyone who can't prove they've been here for at least two years. According to a Dallas immigration lawyer, even migrants *with* that proof have been swept up in courthouse arrests. People like Anderson, who arrived last year, become easy prey. All week, I couldn't help but think how his careful compliance has been reduced to a cruel trap: show up to court and be handcuffed, or stay away and risk deportation by default.

When I watched a CBS News clip of courthouse arrests in San Antonio, the weight of it all broke through. The tears hit before I could stop them.



Federal agents detain a mother and her two young children, 11 and 1.5 years old, outside San Antonio immigration court on June 10, 2025.

Christopher Lee/Staff Photographer



Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other federal law enforcement agents detain and escort a woman and her two children from the federal immigration courts in San Antonio on Tues, Jun 10, 2025. Christopher Lee/Staff Photographer

It wasn't just the voices, raw and breaking — a woman insisting “I don't want to die in Honduras”; a father with six daughters waiting back home; another woman pleading for help, again and again, as she was dragged away. It wasn't even the faces: the Black man in a sharp three-piece suit, standing tall and dignified, his expression resolute as two ICE agents in scruffy plaid shirts flanked him.

No, what broke me were the YouTube comments. The relentless, venomous hatred spilling from what I can only assume are real people — real Americans. “They brought this on themselves,” sneered one. “Aww, too bad! When I broke the law, I went to prison,” mocked another. “They broke the damn law! Come here legitimately, like you’re supposed to!”

I understand the anger. Anger at a system that feels broken. At waves of strangers risking everything to cross a border — to enter Americans’ home — often illegally. At an overwhelmed immigration system that is hopelessly outdated. Anger at runaway inequality, at being left behind while others seem to take shortcuts to safety and opportunity. And anger, especially, at the former president, for doing too little too late to bring order to the border, who seemed to prioritize foreigners while leaving those born here to struggle alone.

But here’s what those keyboard warriors miss: Under both U.S. and international law, requesting asylum is *not* a crime. It’s a legal right. People fleeing persecution — people escaping unimaginable horrors in Nicaragua, Haiti, Venezuela and beyond — have the right to seek refuge, regardless of how they crossed.

Tell me, if it were you — if your life, your family’s life hung in the balance — would you do anything different?

Anderson arrived just before Trump’s return to power and shortly after Venezuela’s fraudulent presidential election tightened Nicolas Maduro’s grip on the country. In April, when I asked if he feared Trump’s escalating crackdown on asylum seekers and immigrants, he shook his head. Fear was nothing new, he said. He’d fled a

government that thrived on threats and made people, even entire families, disappear.

In Houston, he'd found refuge. With the work permit tied to his ongoing asylum case, he'd been able to spend long hours at a Pasadena warehouse, straining and packaging sugar. All to save up for the dream he had to abandon in Venezuela: finishing his studies in mechanical engineering.

What is there to fear? he asked then. He'd played by the rules. "The key is to be careful," he said, his voice low and steady. "Keep up with the laws — and follow them."

This week, when I tried to reach Anderson through text and calls, I got no response. His silence lingers with me, unsettling and heavy. Did the system he trusted betray him?

In the coming weeks, I'll explore how the rules are shifting beneath the feet of people like Anderson — and what it will take to create an immigration system that works for everyone, migrants and Americans alike. Because the future isn't optional. Immigration will define it, whether we rise to meet the moment or not.

*Regina Lankenau is an editorial writer, columnist and a member of the Houston Chronicle editorial board. She can be reached at [regina.lankenau@houstonchronicle.com](mailto:regina.lankenau@houstonchronicle.com).*

June 13, 2025



**Regina Lankenau**

**EDITORIAL WRITER AND COLUMNIST**



Regina Lankenau is an editorial writer and columnist for the Houston Chronicle's opinion desk.

Regina came to the Chronicle after working as a features reporter at a British expat newspaper in Spain. She has a degree in Public and International Affairs from Princeton University, where she wrote for the daily paper and co-founded the school's only international affairs publication.

---

## Editor's Picks



**LOCAL**

**Inside Joe Biden's visit to Galveston's historic chapel**



**LOCAL**

**Downtown Houston's population is surging. Will it last?**



**RESTAU**

**Bao (Midt**

## Let's Play



SpellTower



Pile-Up Poker



Typeshift



Really Bad Chess



Top

---

## About

---

## Contact

---

## Services

---

## Account

---

**HEARST** *newspapers* © 2025 Hearst Newspapers, LLC [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [DAA Industry Opt Out](#) |

Your Privacy Choices (Opt Out of Sale/Targeted Ads)